

New Standards Should Respect Teacher Professionalism

Minnesota is blessed with many high quality, highly professional teachers. As do any professionals, teachers assume that they should be trusted to make their own judgments as to appropriate ways of teaching and learning in their classrooms. All of that will change if Commissioner Yecke's model of proposed standards and testing become the law. Central to her agenda to focus on "content-based" standards similar to those in the Virginia Standards of Learning (SOL) model are standards that prescribe knowledge of factual information and concepts that are then tested by a battery of high-stakes multiple-choice tests.

The Commissioner argues that her approach, unlike the Profile of Learning, does not prescribe how teachers should teach. The reality, as evident in Virginia, is that such an approach is highly prescriptive. Given the heavy emphasis on use of high-stakes multiple-choice tests, teachers will need to focus on "covering" tested material through traditional transmission, lecture methods. Many of the Virginia teachers I worked with this past summer complained about having little autonomy to design their own instruction and they resented having to devote so much instructional time to "teaching to the test" at the expense of engaging students in meaningful learning activities.

Teachers are not the only ones who are unhappy with the SOL. Polls of Virginia citizens reflect a largely negative response to the SOL. A *Richmond Times Dispatch* poll found that 71% of Virginia citizens indicated that the SOL had not improved schools. A Commonwealth Education Poll found that 31% believed that the SOL had improved schools "not at all," and 36% believed that it had improved schools "only a little," with no differences among Democrat, Republican, and Independent respondents.

As professionals, teachers know that their students need far more than simply acquiring and demonstrating recall of content knowledge, particularly if they want to succeed in higher education or the workplace. They know that students need to go beyond acquiring facts and concepts; they need to analyze, synthesize, and criticize those facts and concepts for some meaningful purpose.

As professionals trained in more current methods, teachers also know that some teaching approaches employed thirty years ago are no longer effective. Recent research on how students learn has moved the teaching profession forward just as biomedical research has done for the medical profession. For example, one study (Carbonaro & Gamoran, 2002) found that the amount of analytic writing was the single most important factor contributing to high school students' improved reading comprehension. Unfortunately, in a curriculum based on demonstrating recall of facts and concepts, there will be little room for extensive analytic writing.

Unfortunately, public school teachers have had little or no input into the development of the new standards. Few of us would want a group of parents and business people dictating to our doctors how to treat their patients. But that is what is happening now to teachers. While it is certainly useful to garner input from all segments of society, out of the total 76 members of the reading/math standards committees, only 15 are certified teachers. Of the 40 members on the reading committees, only 2 are licensed reading teachers. Two of the nation's leading reading experts, currently teaching at the University of Minnesota, were excluded from serving on the

reading committees. The committee members' lack of expertise can be seen in the list of books they recommended for ninth graders. They are all popular staples of a 1950s/60s curriculum (e.g., *The Good Earth*, *The Old Man and the Sea*, *Robinson Crusoe*) leaving out more current texts of equal quality that today's students find more engaging (e.g., *To Kill a Mockingbird*; *The Outsiders*; *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*.)

The Kelley/Opatz bill in the legislature represents an alternative approach to designing standards that respects teachers' professionalism. Rather than dictating specific content standards on which students will be tested by a large battery of multiple-choice tests, this bill relies on standards developed by national professional teacher organizations— standards that are more current than many of the proposed standards and which teachers have been implementing with much success. Moreover, the bill minimizes the amount of costly testing, a prudent move in a period of fiscal crisis. Most importantly, the bill recognizes that ultimately, it should be teachers' own professional judgment that determines what curriculum best serves the needs of their particular students and community.